

“Playing *RPG Maker*”? Amateur Game Design and Video Gaming

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ABSTRACT

Game creation tools like *Game Maker* or *RPG Maker* democratize game making and facilitate the development of amateur game design. The best known among these programs have dynamic web-communities with active members making thousands of games. However, as of now, there is little research on amateur game design except for modding or education fields. In this paper I argue that approaching amateur game making in these relations with video game playing allows a better understanding of game creation tools' users. To support my argument, I will lean on the early results of the exploratory step of my ongoing research.

Keywords

Game making, game design, amateur, hobbyist, game creation tools, engines, play, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last thirty years, many software products that help users create games have come out. The participatory website *Game Creation Tools Classification*¹, created by Damien Djaouti (2011), lists 482 of such programs. The most famous among them (*ZZT*, *Game Maker*, *RPG Maker*, etc.) have dynamic web communities with active members making thousands of games. Since they greatly simplify the game-making process – many of them do not require any coding skills – they generalize access to the medium of creation. A few figures can show how the field is swarming: *Construct* has been downloaded more than 3 billion times², more than 5,600 games have been posted online, and the official forum dedicated to that program counts 231,000 registered users. Moreover, on rpgmakerweb.be³ there are almost 60,000 registered members and 3,500 games listed. Apart from that, there exists an incredible amount of small web-communities dedicated to those tools (I counted more than 50 active, dormant or deleted French-speaking forums centered on *RPG Maker* since 2000 until nowadays). Such figures cannot be made up of professional developers only, but rather of a large number of amateurs who appear to be making games for pleasure, in the same way some take photos or shoot movies, i.e. as a hobby.

Nevertheless, as of now, there has been little research on amateur game design; only two fields of investigation are interested in certain practices related to amateur design. Firstly, there are studies on modding practices and user-content creation, motivations (Sotamaa 2010) and relations with the gaming culture (Unger 2012). Even if we know that the main

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motivation of modders can be of artistic nature or to increase their enjoyment with the game (Postigo, 2007), this field generally focuses on fans who want to acquire a job or on the value of fan production. Secondly, the educational studies are interested in how game making can be an engaging way of acquiring both programming skills and media literacy (Gee and Tran 2016, Burke and Kafai 2014). In other words, scholars mainly approach amateurs when they seem to be useful or valuable for the video game industry or government programs. This could be explained by the domination of the convergence paradigm (Jenkins 2006; Flichy 2010), which focuses on links between fans and cultural industries. In the same way, it seems to be uncommon to see papers about non-professional developers in gaming magazines. Despite the impressive numbers and pioneering practices, these amateurs appear almost nowhere in the media. This discordance suggests that amateurs are largely excluded from the mainstream video game culture (Shaw 2010). For my part, I propose a comprehensive approach to amateur game design that focuses⁴ on users of game creation tools. Moving away from the issue of valorization will allow me to focus on what these amateurs can teach us about their relationship to video-game creation.

In this paper I report the early results of the exploratory step of my ongoing research. Instead of approaching amateur game design from professionalization or artistic perspectives, I focus on the links between game making and gaming since it appeared predominant from the start of this research and understudied in the scholar field. As a matter of fact, amateurs frequently refer to “play” when they describe their activity.

METHODOLOGY

My method follows the principles of the grounded theory, which claims to bring out what meaning the respondents attribute to their acts; my goal is to highlight amateurs’ motivations, practices and their feelings about these. My first interviews were non-directive in order to discover what mattered to the respondents. Step by step, interviews became a little more directive in order to deepen some of the comments made by previous informants and, subsequently, it will lead to co-create a comprehensive conceptual framework. This particular method allows access to the motivations of amateurs without imposing a preexisting theoretical framework, and at the same time, it is a way to foreground the presence of amateurs, and to emphasize their right to express themselves. At this stage of the work and taking into account the low range of interviews, I do not assert to be creating a theoretical framework, I will rather share early findings. Among these, as we will see, there is the relations between game making and gaming.

My scope entails interviews realized face to face (8 so far) or via email (4 so far), participatory observation (two web-communities and four IRL meeting between amateurs so far), textual analyses of forums (tens of topics) and game-making autoethnography. These various sources allowed me to cross-check testimonials (Héas & Poutrain 2003). Respondents were recruited from web communities and independent game-developers associations on the basis of two main criteria: first, being non-professional (not financially reliant on this activity), and second, indulging in a practice centered on the use of a game creation tool. Moreover, I have chosen community leaders or advanced users in order to meet people with a lot of experience, and who have had time to reflect on their practice. This will be counterbalanced in further research by other points of view.

All the respondents are male, aged from 25 to 42, and who live in Belgium (7), France (4) and Québec (1). The choice to focus on French-speaking amateurs is motivated by the will to be able to understand particular linguistic nuances.⁵ The word “*amateur*”, for

example, has two meanings in French: 1) being non-professional; 2) being a hobbyist. In this paper I will call “amateurs” the ones that are in a process of professionalization and “hobbyists” the ones who are not (the large majority of my informants⁶ and forum’s users observed.) The respondents are users of *Unity* (2), *Construct 2* (2) or *RPG Maker* (8). *RPG Maker*’s users constitute my main entry point in this field, because of the seniority and the liveliness of its communities.

GAME MAKING AND GAMING: EXPLORATORY RESULTS

I gathered four kinds of statements from interviews or forums in order to address links between playing and game making from different perspectives: 1) informants had made “*imaginary video games*” before being able to design actual video games; 2) some of them approach programs as *RPG Maker* as “toys” or report “*stimulations similar to the ones felt while playing*”; 3) the use of the expression “*make my own [game / RPG / Zelda]*” is hegemonic in interviews as much as on forums; 4) some cheating-related lexicon is used in debates to criticize each other, then these debates could be understood as conflict between players. In the following part, I offer some conclusions that I drew from these first findings.

“*Imaginary video games*”: pretending make games

A first surprising discovery came from the first answers from the interviews. Each time I started asking the informants “*how did [they] start making games,*” ten times out of twelve the answer started by an anecdote from their childhood, and the making of what one informant called “*imaginary video games*”. The pattern is always the same: the informant had played and liked video games “*since always*” and wanted to create video games as a kid so much that he tried to do it with papers, pencils, Legos or toys. Generally, informants refer to video games they had played. “*With my best friend, when I was a kid, we would often make fake video games with Legos for each other. So we took our Legos and we made Zeldas or Metroids [...]. To retrieve objects that made us stronger we had to go to other areas. [...] It was a sort of fantasy⁷ of making a video game*”. Another informant would just use cardboard: “*When I was a child [...] I would put pieces of paper together [to make] Mario’s levels. I had a little character [...] in a cardboard screen, with cardboard joysticks and then I would scroll it on screen, trying to simulate a video game [...]. As it was not electronic we could not play it, so it sucked! It was very frustrating!*”

For these respondents, their hobby of game making cannot be explained solely by taking into account the existence of game making tools. Their will to make games existed before the discovery of *RPG Maker* or *Construct 2*. This is why this discovery is generally lived as a true moment of excitement, releasing frustration. “*When I heard about RPG Maker, I first thought that it was a scam... It seemed impossible!*” says one informant. Another states that “*when I understood how the first features worked, I remember thinking: ‘ok so if that is possible, everything is possible! I can do anything!’*”

Moreover, they show that there is a continuum between these imaginary video games and the use of game-making tools. One of them started to make his own *Zelda* when he was ten. “*When I was a child, I would play Zelda on Nes [Famicom] and I would want to ... I draw my own Zelda on paper. [...] It was a sort of labyrinth [...] and I showed my brother with a pencil where he was going. I would tell my brother ‘ok here you can do that, etc.’*” Years after, he discovered *RPG Maker* on a fan website dedicated to *Zelda*. He immediately set out to adapt his “*Zelda on paper*” and “*drew*” again his seven existing donjons in the program. This case may seem specific but this kind of meanderings is what

is generally described. Another example, focusing on narrative interests this time: *“I started making universes repeatedly, and stories became more and more accomplished (in the very beginning with my toys imitating Star Wars, Zelda, etc.), and I came naturally to the creation of an RPG that is quite fruitful in this respect.”*

The practice of imaginary video games shows distinct things. Firstly, amateur game design do not exist solely because game-making tools do; it is prominent here that a will was already here. Furthermore, imaginary video games are doubly bonded linked to “playing”: they generally refer to actual video games (*“making Zeldas”*), and informants *pretended* to be making games (a *“fantasy”*, a *“simulation”*). Last but not least, the informants drew links between imaginary video games and the use of programs. Their using will be rooted in their infantile practice, at least in the beginning (of course, after years of practice, the users’ approaches evolved).

“Playing RPG Maker”: programs as toys, games or tools

Some of informants refer explicitly to game-creation tools as to toys. One states: *“RPG Maker has always been something like a toy for me”*. Another explains: *“Some consider that we do not develop on RPG Maker but that we are playing RPG Maker. [...] Anyway, there is no true ‘mentor’ on this idea [on his web community]. It’s more something that everyone thought at of some point before moving on.”* A user of *Unity* calls it a *“joujou”* (a French expression to describe a toy in child’s words). Analogies with toys can be found online too. In the presentation folder of a web forum, a newcomer to the forum states that he has been using the program since 2005 but that he has never had a real project. He just *“loves to do mapping with it”* (*“j’adore faire du mapping”*).⁸ *“Mapping”* is an indigenous term for putting together elements from a graphic database in order to draw or design a level. *“It is the same as playing with Lego,”* he says. This fieldwork’s anecdote find other confirmation in a quote from Jeremy Penner about *ZZT*⁹ (founder of *glorioustrainwrecks.com*) reported by Anna Anthropy (2014) that shows his personal playful conception of this program: *“When you’re starting out, you don’t approach making a ZZT game by saying, ‘Here is the vision of the thing that I want to make; how can I build that with ZZT?’ It’s much more natural to ask, ‘Here are the pieces that ZZT gives me; how can I fit them together in an interesting way?’”* It seems to echo the statements from other respondents above. More generally, a large number of hobbyists state that they are more interested by *“messaging around”* with programs (to *“test”*, *“experiment”*, *“try things”*, etc.) than the result. This could reveal a playful attitude (Sicart 2014) related to the enjoyment of the process of using *RPG Maker per se* rather than to the finality of creating an actual game. This echoes with Roth’s autoethnography (2015) of his playful use of *Unity*.

Other informants are clearly orienting their activity towards results and efficiency. One of them explains that making a game can be a game itself, considering many of the users are just *“messaging around”* but claim that *“this ‘game’ [of making a game] becomes more adult when it has a lot of constraints [...] For example, I have to adapt the game I make to fit into the program, but it is part of the creator’s pleasure to play with these constraints”* (my italic). Here, we can see two ways of approaching the programs: trying to see what can be done with such a tool (as Penner claims) or trying to fit a project into the program – the last attitude would probably deserve to be addressed as there are links between art and play, as well as between creative processes and constraints in art. Nevertheless, this depiction of game making as being *“similar to playing”* is not shared by everyone, especially the amateurs who are trying to turn pro. The difference, then, is probably coming from personal projects, orientations, and attitudes, but this would

require confirmation. One of the respondents reported a quote from another user saying: “[On the official RPG Maker’s] they say ‘simple enough for a child, and powerful enough for a game developer’. I think at the beginning the program’s creators saw it as a game. It’s when they saw that some of the users where using it seriously that they started to advertise on this aspect” (my italic). This hobbyist is trying to identify the prescribed or intended uses of the program to legitimate his own point of view. Doing that, he comes to identify a difference between two kinds of users: the ones who are using it *seriously* (developers or amateurs who would like to turn pro, using *RPG Maker* as a tool) and the others (hobbyists, mostly considering *RPG Maker* as a toy).

It happens that the users that are making games “*just for fun*” finish their projects too. And some of them are successful, which can lead to some difficulties. One of my informants had created typical mini-RPGs as a teenager and he stopped using *RPG Maker* during a few years. One day, he started to use it again “*just to see if [he] could be better at it*”. He made an atmospheric puzzle game with a strong narrative and a final plot twist. He posted it online, in a small French *RPG Maker*’s community. “*I received some comments, I was happy like that*” he says. But a few years later, an Austrian discovered his game and translated it into English. The game became popular (considering its amateur game status) when a famous American indie game designer reported it on his own blog. The game is now translated in Japanese, Spanish and Portuguese. A fan made an unofficial sequel and others made cosplays of the characters of the informant’s game. In front of such an opportunity, most amateurs would have capitalized on this success to sell goodies, or a commercial version of the game. The respondent did nothing of it and was not comfortable with that: “*it was really weird to experiment that. I didn’t do it on purpose ... It was just, you know, like that, for fun.*”

As we saw, some amateurs explicitly consider using game creation tools as playing. This last case comes to confirm what others quotes show: hobbyists are often making games for the enjoyment of the process, for themselves and for their friends on web communities. In these conditions, some of them know a kind of accidental success which can be “*weird*” to experiment. This feeling could be seen a confirmation of that they see their activity as non-serious, free, at second degree, with detachment.

“Making my own RPG”: extend the fun and share it

Hobbyists are usually making games they like as gamers. This is probably a significant difference between hobbyists that make games mainly for themselves and amateurs who tend to find a niche market and turn pro. A user of *Construct 2* explains he choose this engine because “*it is really easy to make what he likes: simple plate former*”. A user of *RPG Maker* claims he “*always knew it would be RPGs [that he wanted to make] ... Well ‘always’ ... At least since I played Final Fantasy 7*”. That explains the existence of fan games, sequels, prequels or crossovers inspired by existing franchises (*Star Ocean Zero*, *Final Fantasy VII: Origin*, etc.). But it wouldn’t be accurate to reduce hobbyists’ games to fan games. Indeed, the large majority seems to be referring more to a genre than to a specific franchise.

In both cases, hobbyists don’t say they are making “*a*” *Zelda* or “*a*” RPG. They claim they are making “*their own*” *Zelda*, or RPG, or video game. What can this hegemonic use of such an expression be the sign of? These hobbyists are *appropriating* games and genres that they like. But, moreover, they feel to be *owners* or *authors* of the games created. This highlights the personal aspect in the game-making experience, they are not just mechanically mixing preexisting elements, as an algorithm would do. By creating

games, they seem to express themselves about what they particularly like in games they have played to. The three following examples will detail this behavior.

First, an informant who made a *Zelda*'s fan game has chosen to reinforce the difficulty of labyrinths and puzzle games, his favorite aspect of *Zelda* games, and did not care to develop the story. A second respondent explains that the pleasure experienced in some cases compares to that of playing a game: *"I think that the stimulation brought, when we do it for passion, is close to the one felt while playing [...] Deep inside myself I know that, for example, by setting the equipment statistics or hiding chests in the elements of design in the map, I feel a pleasure similar to the one felt when discovering equipment or hidden chests in an RPG."* This hobbyist is making reference to his own player's experience to explain why he likes to make games. The third example is a user of Unity, more interested in solving coding problems than in one genre or franchise, he explains: *"this is nice because you [understand] the result right now [...]. If I was making a management program for accountants [...] they could explain to me what they need. But I am not in that case, no way to be sure if I am doing what they are expecting me to do."* Moreover, part of the pleasure comes from the anticipation that his *"friends will normally have fun with [his] games"*. This informant generally realizes remixes of existing games, like battleship, especially to play with friends. *"Generally I recreate a game and I add features ... I extend the gameplay with experience points, and so on."* I propose to use his *"extend"* term to describe what hobbyists are doing: they *extend* the fun they experimented while playing games.

According to Boutet (2012) each gamer develops a personal way of playing, what he calls *"playing styles"*. Styles *"(...) emerge from the practical exploration of what makes a good time, of anything that extends or feeds [this good time]"* (courtesy translation). As gamers, the hobbyists first developed their personal playing style. While creating games, they seem to extend the good times experimented. That is why the created games should be considered as a way of sharing their playing style. As an informant states it, making is a way of *"giving [one's] version"*.

"Corrupt the making": confrontations

A discussion between users started in 2006 when the main French *RPG Maker*'s web-community tried to highlight the *"best games"* made by its members. A lot of questions arose in respect to the legitimacy of the standards to be applied in this judgment process. Progressively, the arguers divided themselves into two camps (and into two games list).

First, the *"classics"* (*les classiques*) claimed that *RPG Maker* is *"as the name implies"* designed to make typical RPGs, including a detailed story, a group of characters who are chosen to save the world, a large range of objects, sub quests and at least 30 hours of gameplay. This group denies the need for drawing unique graphics: the *RPG Maker*'s preexisting graphics' database is seen as enough to make a RPG. For them, only complete games are legitimate to be published. Second, the *"customs"* (*les originaux*) claimed that being an amateur meant being free to try *"different"*, *"personal"* and *"artistic"* things. This implies detachment from the RPG genre (and any other genres). These amateurs appreciate wholly customized games, original music and graphics and hijacking software features. These amateurs usually publish unfinished games, short prototypes or demos.

This debate can be seen as a renewal of the traditional debates between prioritizing the genre's codes or a personal author's intention, or between lone genius and contributors (Diakopoulos et al. 2007). My claim, however, is that this distinction is mainly

formalized into discourses afterwards. Indeed, if we take a closer look at the concrete acts by amateurs, these two authorship postures seem to be more a way of defending personal ways of having fun with games and game making than an ideological or artistic debate. I will report quotes from two respondents in order to highlight this observation.

A respondent from the “custom” clan started to use RPG Maker to make a fan version of a widely licensed game. A typical RPG, “*as planned by the program*”, he says. But, he claims that “*over time [he] dropped the idea of making actual games (...) and started messing around with it*”. His main goal turned into “*testing*” or “*experimenting*”. He “*didn’t want to become a great video game designer but to have fun with friends*”. He made a lot of “*things*” (games) which were “*made in a few days*”, he explains. The speed criterion seems to be part of the pleasure: allowing to test many ideas quickly, showing the results to his friends and “*moving on*”. Otherwise, since he liked to draw he quickly made his own graphics. He started by following (and developing) his taste for drawing and making unexpected experiences and then formalized it as being a kind of creation when he had to sharing experiences with others, becoming then a members of the “*custom ones*”.

A respondent from the “classics” group liked detailed stories more than anything else. Before making video games, he made a lot of “*pencil and paper RPGs*” to play with his brother. He wanted to create RPGs even before he discovered *RPG Maker*. The exciting part, he says, is to “*make characters who interact between themselves, writing the plot twists*”. He uses graphics from the preexisting program database and other graphics resources. He claims that, as a person “*more concerned by the content than the shape*”, the graphics are not that important to him. He did not seem to be enthusiastic about learning how to draw: it was not part of his fun production process. He started by following (and developing) his taste for writing developed stories and then formalized it by creating “*proper games*”.

Both of the respondents I quoted eventually decided to leave their game-making community or even to stop making games. When they explained these decisions, the expressions they used were quite violent and demonstrated that both their way of using *RPG Maker* were described in cheating or deviant terms within their communities. The first respondent, a member of the ‘*custom ones*’, claims that “*he left very bitter*” because he was “*accused of corrupting ‘the making’*” (“*corrompre le making*”); since he was not making typical RPGs, he was rejected. On the forum, other amateurs said these games were “*stupid*”, “*useless*” and his use of the program “*not relevant*”. The second one claims he left his community because he felt “*like an atheist trying to socialize with Catholics (...). We see life, art, creation or video game in different ways*”. And indeed when typical RPGs were released, some of the authors were accused of extending the gaming experience’s length “*artificially*”, because some “*random quests*” were added to the game or some monsters were “*excessively hard*” to defeat. Nevertheless, other community members constantly repeated that it was meaningless to create similar classic games all time.

Other kinds of arguments were also involved in the debate, of course, mostly related to artistic considerations, respect for the RPG genre, and community elitism. My point here is that we cannot understand the controversies between users by framing the debate only on the authorial or artistic level. In order to better understand amateurs, including their debates, an analysis of their practices as linked to their tastes and practices as makers *and* players is required. As each gamer develops a playing style, each hobbyist seems to

develop a personal “making style”, which could be seen as a mix between the prolongation of playing style and ways of having fun with game creation tools. And then, afterwards, being confronted with other playing and making styles, forces them to explain their practices, often producing artistic discourses. It then seems that in order to understand game making debates between hobbyists or amateurs, references to playing shouldn’t be underestimated.

CONCLUSION: GAME MAKING AS CUSTOMIZATION?

In this paper I reported early findings of my ethnographic field related to the links between game making as a hobby and gaming. We saw that most of informants created “*imaginary video games*” when they were children, inspired by games they played. This activity of pretend making games can be seen as a child’s form of play and can reveal a second degree author’s posture. When informants discovered game creation tools, some of them identified them as toys or recognized similar feelings experienced while playing and making. They usually undertake their “*own*” games, extending and sharing their own gaming experience, expressing their own tastes as gamers. The web communities’ members seem then to develop artistic discourses and standards based among other things on what makes a good time as players as much as tool’s users. Since each video game player is developing his own playing style, hobbyists may have to confront with others’ standards when they share their creations online.

Although still being in the early stage of my research some first conclusions can be drawn so far. Firstly, these findings confirm the interest of approaching amateurs and hobbyists not only as people in a professionalization process or learning code. To understand them, we have to approach them as game designers as much as players. Indeed, hobbyists have many reasons to report similarities between playing and making: they extend their gamer’s experience, they anticipate the future amusement of their own public, they express their personal tastes and styles as gamers and can play or be playful with the tools.

However this paper is only a first step on this research focus and many aspects still have to be deepened. For example, the links between the tastes of hobbyists as video games players and their tastes as tools’ users should be more documented and detailed. Moreover, game making tool’s interfaces are sometimes similar to video games interfaces and – like the map editor of *RPG Maker’s* – and it would be interesting to know if these features push users to identify it as toys or games. Another interesting point would be to confirm if there is a clear distinction between hobbyists that would be in a gaming experience’s extension process and amateur that would be a in a commercial process. How do each of them negotiate with those processes at a personal level? How do hobbyists and amateur negotiate between them? All issues that require to further investigate this field as yet little explored.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.creatools.gameclassification.com>, visited 01-12-15

² <https://www.scirra.com/construct2>, visited 12-05-16

³ <http://www.rpgmakerweb.com/>, visited 11-12-15

⁴ I plan to extend my field to modders and game programming in further researches.

⁵ On the contrary this is not a choice to question only one generation of men – this could let think there is no women in this sector, which is not true.

⁶ The amateurs I meet generally do not wish to earn money – only two of my twelve respondents would like to become professional and only one turned pro

⁷ All italics in this paper are made by me.

⁸ I have marked the quotes that I have translated from French by placing them in italics.

⁹ *ZZT* is a video game that came out in 1991 and was developed by Tim Sweeney. The “world editor” was (and still is) used as a game creation tool by amateurs and enthusiasts.